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THE HUMANIST AND PROGRESS

BY PERCY HAZEN HOUSTON

THE word progress as it is ordinarily employed to-day may be defined as the gradual but steady betterment of the human race, and its march toward a more or less definite goal which is to be the final consummation of all our efforts. Of progress such as this, two ideals have won the general favor of the present generation, and they lie back of most of our current thought and much of our active effort toward improvement.

One of them we may conveniently call the sentimental or romantic ideal. Its historic origin goes back to the middle years of the eighteenth century, to the time when the fashionable Deism had pretty well demolished the imposing orthodox edifice that was crowned by the fierce and rigid dogma of human depravity. With Divinity quite reasoned out of existence, the pleasanter and more comfortable principle of natural sympathy assumed in the popular mind the place formerly occupied by the austere conception of an awful responsibility of the soul to its Maker for the conduct of life; and the problem of evil, so disturbing to all former systems, found an easy solution through shifting its burdens upon other shoulders. Enormously aided by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, particularly Diderot and Rousseau, this principle made its final outlet into the thought of the world through the transforming power of the French Revolution. Thence it has permeated the whole of modern life, in the beginning by means of the doctrine of the Rights of Man as it was carried by the conquering French arms over the Continent of Europe, and then as expressed by many post-Revolutionary writers, perhaps best represented in England by the poet Shelley. In his *championship* of mankind against all forms of tyranny he was the precursor of that literary exaltation of revolution which has become an essential part of the modern spirit.

This romantic theory of progress rests upon a fundamentally new conception of man closely related to that principle of sympathy which, as has just been suggested, had transformed the whole view of life. It is an abiding faith in natural goodness, a belief in the infinite and progressive perfectibility of human nature, and, by a curious shift from the individual to the mass of men, an increased sympathy for mankind in the lump and an effort to promote its progress toward some far-off divine event of which we can know so little. It lies behind most of our schemes of social reform in so far as their aim is the purely material one of improving social conditions. Neglecting for the most part the disciplines of old-fashioned religion that would cherish the power controlling our impulsive selves, it emphasizes the opposite virtues of altruism and sympathy. As the traditional faith has decayed, our hearts have gone out to our fellowmen in a desperate endeavor to find the peace that comes only through victory over worldly desires. Romantic progress may then be defined as the substitution of expansion for discipline as the means by which a new world may be built, more beautiful and more secure than any before.

As the sentimental dream of progress has assumed definite form, it has become one social Utopia or another, whereby this recalcitrant world may suffer itself to be brought into harmony with the desires of the dreamer. His most persistent dream has been universal peace, a vision of the future when the nations will meet in the parliament of man as they find it no longer necessary to keep a watchful and suspicious eye upon their neighbors. The horrid disillusionment of these last years has scarcely sufficed to quench the Utopian's ardor for the consummation of his dream.

Closely related to romantic progress and indeed almost inextricably bound up with many of its expressions, is another ideal which must also carry us back to the complex eighteenth century if we would comprehend its growth. The Industrial Revolution, with the consequent rise of the factory system and the division of society into the main classes of capitalist and wage-earner, paralleled the French Revolution as one of the chief transforming events of modern times. With the enormous advances in mechanical efficiency, and the marvellous conquests over Nature

which the modern world has witnessed, there has grown up a hope of a systematic and general advance of the race. Through the development of the science of biology, another science modelled on parallel lines, that of sociology, has been created and a sort of religion of humanity on the material plane has tended to take the place of the ancient fear of God in the human soul. Evolution and natural selection have become the watchwords of this modern scientific spirit, new sciences like experimental psychology and eugenics have won increasing suffrage, crime and criminals have received the attention of their so-called experts, solemn reports of investigations are being filed away for future reference, and the belief spreads that human relations may somehow be regulated by scientific formulae. Quantitative and dynamic standards have thus gradually usurped the place of the human ones in our schemes of improvement.

During the last half century or more these two ideals of progress have very nearly coalesced, and are now almost indistinguishable. The wearied romanticist, seizing upon the new scientific impulse, took hold upon life with renewed vigor and wove again his dream of a new heaven and a new earth. From an extreme of individualism it was for him an easy vault to an extreme of collectivism, of machinery and organization, creating new and favorable conditions under which the soul of man may expand. And so he turned to various forms of socialism, accepting even the communism of revolutionary Russia as a dream realized, from which he has scarcely been awakened by the rude shock of facts that will not be denied. Even so, he still retains his light-hearted desire to tinker with our political and economic structure, just to see what will happen by a sudden change; for, he declares, no change can be for the worse, and may result in overturning the institutions that have laid their heavy hand upon man's free, soaring spirit.

Now there exists a third group, or type, whom we may for convenience's sake call the Humanists. The origin of this humanism needs also to be briefly traced if we would know its bearing upon our present problems. The growth of new institutions during the Renaissance created a need of training political and intellectual leaders whose attitude should be forward-looking and

modern. With the dying of chivalry, the gentleman and the courtier occupied the place the knight had held as the central unit in medieval life, and it was necessary to discover a new education suitable for their proper development. The solution of this problem fell to the universities, and out of the performance of their task arose the Humanism that was to retain its hold over Europe for more than two centuries, until it was broken by the great cataclysm of the French Revolution. Sir Thomas More, John Colet, and Sir Thomas Elyot, under the guidance and inspiration of Erasmus, made the English universities centres of the New Learning.

And to what did these men turn for their perpetual models of noble conduct by which they might fashion the "Governour" to make him a worthy leader of the great nation that had but recently come to herself? Naturally to the Classics, as they depicted the heroism and the wisdom of the noble men of Greece and Rome. From Milton and Johnson and Burke, to Arnold and Newman, the men of strongly conservative temper have steeped themselves in this culture, believing that there they found a centre from which they might proceed to interpret the scattered elements of their own lives. As they have watched the waste and the chaos and the feebleness of human effort to move forward, they have searched for a central idea which might bring order into the lives of those who accepted its yoke. And this idea, so precious to their minds, rests in the classic, or the humanistic, virtues of control and proportion and restraint upon the expanding impulses which rise from the sub-conscious life and push forward into outer activity. The Golden Mean of the temperate life, the inner sense of fitness that prevents the individual from moving to either extreme of inhibited emotions or uncontrolled expansion, and the belief that justice cannot be established by mere revolt against institutions, are the convictions that lie close to the heart of the humanist. In the humanities, moreover, he finds the clearest and most beautiful expression of them, and he would therefore fight to reintroduce a humane culture into the teaching and the curriculum of our educational systems, for it is here he sees the fairest opportunity to make his ideas prevail.

When, therefore, the humanist approaches the heterogeneous

elements of modern life, he pauses doubtfully before he makes any decision as to the direction in which his efforts shall lie. Particularly is this true in the political and economic field, and he is, accordingly, temperamentally opposed to the progressive or liberal point of view, which bases its philosophy upon an opportunism dictated only by the exigencies of the moment. He may, it is true, be a tory, treading the good old paths because they are old, but he will not be, if he is possessed of fair critical insight. Nor need he suffer loss of sympathy for pain or distress or fail to seek means for their relief.

Such being the nature of the humanist, what relation can he bear toward the essentially modern idea of progress? In the first place, it must be understood that he is under no illusions as to a better time coming when men shall cast off their hates and ambitions, and live together in friendly sympathy. This disillusionment, if such it be, is not, however, that of the romanticist turned cynic, nor of the man of science whose formulas have chained him to a purely materialistic level, but a clear-sighted recognition of the nature of man and the unchanging influences that come together to form character. Man to-day, and always, is born with a complex of impulses and desires, and the manner in which he directs his life depends on the extent to which he brings these impulses and desires under the control of his conscious will. Few men, however, whether as individuals or in the mass, are able to remain masters of themselves or their fates, and we can therefore scarcely hope for any steady self-improvement in the mass of men that we call society.

But the true humanist, who would mediate between the extremes of excess and restraint, believing each of them a form of intemperance, goes further and admits that there are, in a general way, two types of individual, each of them to a greater or less degree shading into each other. We all know the man of temperament, tending to shake himself free from all authority and seeking an outlet for his powers through a purely expansive life. More congenial to the humanist is the other type that subjects itself to inner control, and, within certain limits, accepts the dictates of outer authority. This type yields to discipline, submits to routine, and makes its study the pursuit of perfection. The

one type, if not submissive to any check upon temperament, runs into an excess of subjective egoism; the other, if not balanced by some degree of impulsive life, loses vitality and becomes sterile of any true self-expression.

These two types of men find their parallel in the ages of man. As the pendulum swings in one direction, we see the forces of expansion dominant, and naturalistic philosophies in control of thought and action; as the pendulum swings in the other, an age of contraction or concentration follows, be it imperialistic or aristocratic or oligarchic. Now, the humanist views with grave concern, if not alarm, these extreme swings of the pendulum of life; but especially does he fear the excesses of expansion, and he believes that he finds his fears justified by a dreadful catastrophe like the Great War that we have just lived through, which he considers the inevitable outcome of an unchecked naturalism. Rarely indeed have there occurred brief periods when it seemed as if a fairly complete balance between the spiritual and vital forces had been obtained, and he sees these as the great ages of the world. The age of Pericles was one of these, and the Christian thirteenth century was another. But these seemingly perfect moments of history have been but moments, possessing in themselves the seeds of decay, the one yielding to the two clashing imperialisms of the cities of Greece, the other to the forces of naturalism hastening to destroy the beautiful static ideal of medieval life.

And what of to-day? To-day we seem to be slipping back into the old confused living of the days before the war, but with many things smoldering beneath the surface of our life. Whether we are ignorantly preparing the way for a tragic conflict of classes, a warfare to the death against alien races, or the creation of new imperialisms to be cleansed again by blood, only time can reveal. Or whether we shall avoid them all through the sheer inertia that so often prevents catastrophe, we cannot tell.

If such be the case, what of this great period of reform and the new era of good feeling? But the humanist becomes more doubtful than ever, for he has seen the Fourteen Points of reform essayed again and again, only to meet a humanity invariably too weak or too intent on its business to listen long to the lofty voice

of the idealist. He believes, moreover, that any reform accomplished by the will of a mere majority is doomed to failure, as we may some day discover when the fine fervor of the prohibition officials begins to abate. No idealism, unless it is based solidly on discipline of the individual will, can hope for any measure of practical success. The humanitarian dream of human brotherhood seems to him but a projection of the ego into the outer world, there to meet other egos similarly projected, and to clash with them because nowhere behind them is there a restraining power upon self-assertion. So, also, the faith in organized charity, as it attempts to remake human nature through a mere change of environment, seems ultimately futile, unless with it is preached the hard and often repellent lesson of individual responsibility. Indeed, one of the saddest reflections that occur to the humanist's mind is the slow corruption and breaking down of noble efforts, the sheer waste of splendid sacrifice, and the drift toward control by evil forces, because the will grows tired and the eternal vigilance that is the price of moral health becomes at last relaxed.

If, then, the humanist has so little share in the prevailing optimism, seeing the ultimate failure of most schemes of improvement, he may well question how he shall bear himself toward his fellows and what work he may find in the world to do. He would again candidly admit that he holds no illusions as to the positive effect of his own or anyone else's effort toward a definite goal or final improvement of the human race, but he would not repudiate entirely the great humanitarian ideal of service. He believes that every man of wealth or of unusual education owes a return to his fellows for his superior advantages; but he must frankly declare that his primary interest is not in institutions or in any sort of institutionalism, but in the individual, whom he would carry forward just as far as each one is capable of advancing.

With this said, the humanist, by self-definition,—that is, by the fact that his main interest in life is the relations of men to each other,—will ever retain an exceedingly lively interest in all that occurs within the sphere of his observation. He has nevertheless certain rather definite ideals of discipline which he is

bound to preach in season and out to a world not prone to listen to his voice. Moreover, he knows that except for the unremitting toil of himself and others like him, those standards by which he endeavors to guide his own life and to which he believes the world must eventually turn if we are to pull ourselves out of impending chaos, will be lost, and anarchy will hold us in its grip. The humanist, then, is like a policeman who cannot force men to do good, but can keep down the evil in society and prevent wrong. He is the steady, conservative, critical force, the necessary check upon a drift toward the unknown future, often making a losing fight, but not seldom leaving a clear and definite impress upon the formation of ideas, which, after all, spells the only progress worth considering. He is the home of lost causes, glorying in the good fight against ignorance and unreason. For he feels that his efforts are the kind that tend toward health and sanity, to the creation of ethical standards and the building of will and character, to meet the onrush of all that makes for dissolution.

All this sounds dismal enough, and the ordinary man may naturally ask if this whistling to keep one's courage up, this setting one's back to the wall in a forlorn hope of beating off the enemy, leaves the humanist a very cheerful person. And as he reviews in his mind the long course of history, the errors and injustice of men, the cruelty and rapacity and vanity which have made the world a shambles and the lives of men a long agony as they have gone to their fate, to be succeeded by other generations with a similar possibility to torture them, he puts the same question to himself. If this dark picture be a true one, how shall he treat his own life and the lives of others?

Now, if he have within himself something of mystic insight, he will find in his own soul the content he is unable to discover in the unresting flux of material change, and he will seek his happiness there where the passing illusion of this world cannot reach him. But whether or not religion has brought peace to his desires, he will bear a courageous and cheerful front before the world of men and things. With a sense of participation in the pain and the waywardness of the world as keen as that of the most ardent young radical, he will yet drive his shafts of criti-

cism straight toward the source of ignorance and error. By the white light of reason, tempered by the knowledge that comes through a long race experience, he would judge, and through correct judgments—so far as judgments can be made correct in an imperfect world—he would try to show by what means wrong may be made right.

As a moralist and critic, then, the humanist would take his stand in the hope of helping to create a large body of clear-thinking men, who in turn may exert an even larger influence upon the current of events. That is, after all, his real hope, and toward that he bends his best efforts. And that end he perceives can best be brought nearer through the medium of a rightly directed system of education, wherein the humanities may find again a central place. As an educator, then, either actively engaged in the business of teaching, or in sympathetic contact with the profession, the humanist will most often be found, and there we may leave him pursuing the work he was meant to perform and happy in the thought that all effort, based on sound principles and persistently carried through, is to its author its own reward.

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